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Issue 11

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These scrumptious pieces of bacon were photographed (and eaten) by Dave Ahlquist.

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FINDING THE FOOD

New Discoveries in Valley, NE by Marq Manner



Delicious! offers breakfasts, sandwiches, entrées, wraps and salads in addition to bakery and dessert items.

Recently, I have spent a few days looking for a town or area to write about for this article and surprisingly, it was more difficult than usual. Many times, when driving around the back roads and through the towns outside of Omaha, I have to do so in the afternoon or on Sundays when a lot of small town cafes, bars and restaurants are not open. I really found myself struggling to come up with even one restaurant worthy of talking about until I took one last shot and came up with a huge winner.

“Valley – and specifically a bakery and café aptly titled Delicious! – are now on my map.”

When thinking about where I wanted to hit and knowing my time limitations for the day, I realized that I had never been to Valley proper. You skirt it all of the time if you are heading to Fremont or further into the Northwest area of the state, but many don't have a reason to actually make Valley a destination though it is only ten minutes outside of Omaha on the highway. That changed for me after this recent trip. Valley, and specifically a bakery and café aptly titled Delicious!, are now on my map.

While driving through Valley, I gravitated toward the open sign at what I was hoping was more than a bakery. Sure enough, upon entering Delicious! I saw the handwritten menu with breakfast offerings, hot sandwiches, entrées, wraps, and salads. Looking over the menu I saw a chicken wrap, quiches and frittatas, along with waffles and pancakes that included ingredients such as peanut butter and jelly, caramel, apple and pecan. Sandwiches such as Italian beef, pulled pork listed along with chicken options were also on the board.

The most expensive items on the menu were the salads, and there was a wide variety of them. I don't eat salads, so I can only assume after the meal I am about to describe that these are large and full of

quality ingredients. I didn't see an item on the lunchtime board that was over \$10.00 with many of the items right at the \$7.00 range.

I was approached by a gentleman, the only person who was working this afternoon. He would serve as my waiter, chef, and eventually my tour guide. I opted for the Italian beef sandwich and the cream of potato soup that was also listed on the board. He served the soup, in a nice piece of china. It was homemade, hearty and thick; full of potatoes, carrots, and celery. It was very tasty, not full of salt or over seasoned and allowed for the natural flavors to define the soup.

My sandwich arrived shortly after and featured not the usual ground beef, but medium sliced beef soaked in a flavorful au jus. As I began to enjoy the plentiful sandwich, I realized the bottom half of the bun was not going to win against the onslaught of juices, so I started to fork and knife it. After my meal, I perused the bakery and dessert options, and as there is a USA Today article on the wall naming Delicious! as one of the Top Ten Bakery/Cafés in America, I wasn't going to walk away without something from the case. I zoned in on a bread pudding muffin heaped with chocolate. When I ate it later, I found that I had mislead myself on the chocolate front and instead had an equally tasty, more subtle bread pudding flavor from the large, moist roll.

“USA Today named Delicious! as one of the Top Ten Bakery/Cafés in America.”

Typically, the eatery experience is over once you pay the bill and leave a tip on the table. Such was not the case on this visit. The gentleman, sensing I was not from Valley, wanted me to see the art gallery and event space next door which was owned by his sister. I said I would love to see it and he brought me over to The Gallery & Loft by Wendy Deane.

The gallery features the works of Deane. I was introduced to her at the entrance and they began to show me the bottom level. I was immediately attracted to a row of large, beautifully set tables that sat amongst works of art. This would be a fantastic spot for a brunch with a large extended family, an offsite work luncheon or outing. Wendy took over the rest of the tour and brought me upstairs to see the rest of the event area. I was blown away by the elegance of the furniture, a stunning white piano, a dining room setting with soft plush chairs around a table, a large TV (that folds out or in, depending on the mood of the event being had) and a gorgeous white pool table. The centerpiece of the space is a large, modern kitchen that hosts cooking parties and assists with wine tastings.

My desperate attempt to find something interesting to write about turned out to be one of the better food and small town experiences in a long time. The surprising twist of quality in the small town café, the discovery of the luxurious gallery and loft, along with the friendly folks I met along the way made this an afternoon trip I won't soon forget: I look forward to revisiting it many times.

Q&A: Chef Robert & Cooking Matters



Share Our Strength's *Cooking Matters*, nationally sponsored by the ConAgra Foods and Walmart Foundations, is a groundbreaking nutrition-education program that connects families with food by teaching them how to prepare healthy, tasty meals on a limited budget. Professional chefs and nutritionists volunteer their time and expertise to lead hands-on courses that show adults, teens and kids how to purchase and prepare nutritious foods in healthful, safe and tasty ways. This knowledge can mean the difference between feeding families just for one night and making sure they never again have to worry about when their next meal will come.

With six specialized nutrition curricula, *Cooking Matters* takes a cooking-centered approach to nutrition and household budgeting. Each class includes hands-on meal preparation led by a chef who teaches participants that cooking healthy foods can be simple, enjoyable, delicious and affordable. We recently sat down with Chef Robert, one of the volunteer chefs, to talk about the program.

FSM: What do you do for a living and what is your culinary background?

Chef Robert: I Attended Johnson & Wales Culinary School in Denver, CO. Currently, I'm the Chef Manager for Sodexo at Midwest Surgical Hospital in Omaha. Previously, I was the Executive Chef for Roja Mexican Grill, worked as a Sous Chef at Biaggi's in Omaha and as a Sous Chef at Heritage Eagle Bend Golf Course in Parker, CO.

FSM: How did you hear about *Cooking Matters* and why did you decide to get involved?

Chef Robert: I was at the local farmers market and stopped by the *Cooking Matters* booth, heard about the cause and went to the Volunteer Training at the VNA. Once I attended the training and learned about the message of teaching children and families in need, as a parent I couldn't say no to helping children in need and sharing something I am so passionate about: Cooking!

FSM: What has been the most valuable lesson you have learned thus far as a volunteer?

Chef Robert: Every little bit counts! Simple tasks, like cutting an onion, that I do every day as a chef can be large and daunting for the at-home cook. People want to learn and it is an amazing feeling to see them grow each week as the course goes on.

FSM: What is the most important lesson you want your participants to learn in your classes?

Chef Robert: Safety. Food and knife safety are the roots to a good foundation for cooking. Knife safety is important because people are often intimidated by or don't know how to use a knife correctly, which makes the job harder. I just try to give them simple instructions on how to hold the knife correctly and how to protect their hand that is holding the food. Confidence is what we try to instill.

"Start kids cooking early. That way, they are better prepared to make good food choices later in life."

FSM: What are some of your thoughts/opinions on healthy eating and cooking these days?

Chef Robert: Start kids cooking early! The more kids are involved, the more likely they will eat new and different foods. I find that the more involved kids are with prepping and cooking in class, the more excited they are to try the foods. This way, as children grow into young adults, they are better prepared to go out on their own and make good choices later in life.

FSM: Why is *Cooking Matters* important to you and why do you think it is important for the community of Omaha?

Chef Robert: *Cooking Matters* is a way for me to share my passion for food. Cooking can be a chore, but with a few basic skills they start to find the joy in it. This program helps them to understand how to make cooking fun and not a stressful event after a long day at work. I find it's great for the community to have a hands-on learning experience with a professional chef. It is also a great way to expose people to new things that they would not have tried on their own.

FSM: What is your favorite memory volunteering with *Cooking Matters* so far?

Chef Robert: Our classes run six weeks and each week the kids get more responsibility cooking the recipe. This particular class was a third to fourth-grade class and they were making Stove Top Mac & Cheese from scratch. The kids worked as a team doing their assigned duties and when meal time came, one of the kids spoke up and said "Wow, this looks like it came from a restaurant!" The look of pride and satisfaction on their faces was priceless.

FSM: How do you think other chefs in the community can get involved?

Chef Robert: Try it once! The program is so fun and laid back. The team that runs *Cooking Matters* at the VNA is awesome; they make it easy to show up and teach a class. Go see the volunteer training at the VNA and there is no way you can say no to the program.

For more information contact Sarah Lewis at slewis@thevnacares.org or visit www.cookingmattersomaha.org.



Bacon

The Ultimate Ingredient by John Horvatinovich

From jam to donuts, cupcakes to macaroni and cheese – even Vodka – bacon is everywhere in food and spirits. Bacon has an amazing affect on nearly everyone and in recent years, bacon has influenced many culinary dishes.

Maxim magazine recently ranked Omaha as one of the “40 Best Man Cities in America”. Can you think of anything manlier than a big stack of crispy, delicious bacon? And what about women? “Baconistas”, if I may, are women who love bacon and need its crisp, sultry characteristics. So, let’s explore the local bacon scene in Omaha and look at the national bacon craze in the everyday products we use.

“With no end in sight, bacon continues to be a driving force in food, drinks and other products.”

Here in Omaha, there are some great things happening with bacon. The Grey Plume, one restaurant in particular, is making headlines and friends across the nation. In only one year of operations, The Grey Plume has accomplished more than most restaurants will in 30 years of business. The mastermind behind this award-winning restaurant is chef and owner, Clayton Chapman. As a trendsetter and classically trained chef, Chef Chapman had a few things to say about how bacon works in his kitchen.

“Bacon, is the ultimate ingredient,” said Chef Chapman. “We use bacon, or pork belly rather, in multiple facets. We serve house cured and smoked bacon on our burger. You can also find us eating it most days as a part of a family meal.”

“We routinely serve braised pork belly, which is cured for 48 hours and then braised for an additional 72 hours,” Chef Chapman explained. “We then press the belly to shape it, sear it and poach it for the tables. So, in short, it takes about a week to prepare. We make bacon ice cream from the rendered fat and we also sear most of our steaks and fish from extra bacon fat if we have it available.”

The Zin Room, built inside the stunning Hotel Deco, is also offering a few menu items to satisfy your bacon fix. Maker’s Mark, a delicious bourbon in its own right, is used by the Zin Room with their bacon to take both items to another level. Bourbon for Breakfast is bacon infused Maker’s Mark served on the rocks with a slice of thick, crispy bacon. If you are fond of bourbon on any level, this is a delicious drink to enjoy while you take in the sights and sounds of the lounge.

In addition, the famous bacon wrapped dates at the Zin Room are another wonderful offering. Sweet, soft dates along with crisp, salty bacon and luxurious bleu cheese make for a delightful dish. A hearty pour of balsamic reduction almost sends this decadent appetizer into the realm of a dessert. Served on a white porcelain dish, slightly curved to encompass the candy-store-like treats, be sure to box these up for your next movie. Forget trying to sneak in a box of Skittles.

Locally, you can find one hell of a sugar wizard using bacon in her daily offerings. Jeannie Ohira, co-owner of Ted and Wally’s Premium Homemade Ice Cream in downtown Omaha, serves up scoops of love and saltiness in the shop daily.

“At Ted and Wally’s, we make several bacon ice cream flavors,” said Ohira. “The first time I added bacon to ice cream, I added candied bacon to a buttery French custard ice cream. I wasn’t really

happy with it, so we ditched that recipe and started over. From there I worked on what we now call Buttery Maple Bacon: a very popular flavor. We also developed a Chocolate Nut Bacon recipe that has chocolate chunks, pecans and candied bacon.”

Ted & Wally’s also caters to bacon lovers with eating restrictions.

“Honestly, the turkey bacon ice cream is pretty tasty, because the bacon keeps a nice crunchy texture throughout the ice cream making process,” Ochira explained. “We also have a recipe for Vegan Apple Spice Bacon and Vegan Maple Bacon made with vegetarian bacon.”

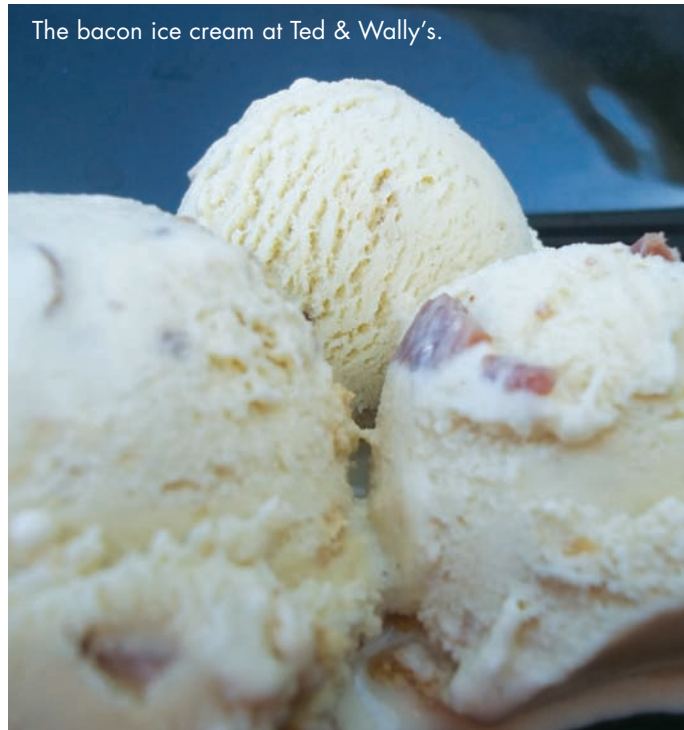
Jeannie’s favorite is the French Toast Bacon ice cream, and rightfully so. Preparing to take your first nervous bite, you wonder if this can be any good. As the ice cream moves around your palate, the air hits your taste buds and releases the subtle spices of cinnamon and nutmeg. You can actually picture the essence of what you are eating: a giant plate of moist, buttery, sliced bread topped with delicious maple syrup and a stack of bacon on the side, fashioned like Jenga blocks.

Even the corporate boys and girls had to get in on the bacon craze. Denny’s debuted a bacon sundae this year. Brick House Tavern and Tap offers an appetizer of deviled eggs with smoky bacon and Tabasco. Then there is the long list of bacon-inspired products like mayonnaise, baby formula, dental floss, envelopes, lip balm, popcorn, rubs and salts. Bacon is meat candy and I am a fat kid in a candy store.

From ice cream and vodka, to cupcakes and bourbon, bacon is everywhere. Chefs and restaurateurs have long used the essence and physical nature of bacon in their culinary repertoire. Wrapped, rendered, seared or baked, great chefs are doing some amazing things on a daily basis to transform their dishes.

What is next? A bacon scented fragrance? Well, that too has been done. A Chicago-based company makes *Bacon*, a fragrance for both men and women. So, with no end in sight, bacon continues to be a driving force in food, drinks and other products. Hopefully, it will continue for years to come.

The bacon ice cream at Ted & Wally’s.





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The Ethnically Enhanced Pantry

by Ann Summers

Define Ethnic:

The categories of culinary ethnicity in this article are mine, and are a very general, clumsy way to clump an entire globe and time-line of human eating into a very small space. The clumps and delineations are not even real – geographically speaking – and even if they were, we couldn't give props to all the differences between regional cuisines within each area; that's what books and ethnographies are for. I know India, the Middle East and Japan are considered part of Asia, and I know there are lots of other types of markets and ethnic traditions out there. This little jaunt is meant to be a summary, or tasting menu, if you will. If I've left anything out, you have to realize that not everything will fit on the table, or the page. These are simply some of the foods I look for, the different types of markets I look in and I hope you will too.

“There are plenty of unusual things in ethnic markets, but there are even more that you will recognize.”

Define Tradition:

What would traditional Italian cuisine be without tomatoes? There would be no Pizza Margherita or Marinara Sauce, that's for sure. What would Indian, Southeast Asian and Chinese food be without hot peppers (chiles)? There certainly would be no fiery Tikka Masalas, Thai Curries or Szechuan Chickens without little capsaicin bombs. But those dishes are no ancient tradition: tomatoes and chiles (both hot and mild) evolved, were domesticated and originated in America. Though some Europeans might have been initially skeptical about these members of the nightshade family (some others are poisonous), tomatoes and chiles became

integral building blocks to so many cuisines outside the Americas, we couldn't list them all here. Hmmmm... if some of the most ancient food traditions in the world could change so radically, maybe it's time for a little more culinary broad-mindedness.

Define Local:

When you want food that is as fresh as possible, as authentic as possible and as cheap as possible, you should go to the source. Buying local produce makes sense because it is fresher and comes in greater variety at the Farmer's Market than at your typical grocery. Local meats, such as the grass-fed beef and farm range chicken sold by the Nebraska Food Coop and other local growers are tastier, and the farming practices are easier to find out about. Increasingly, more local produce is found in our regular groceries, but what about the stuff we've never bought locally? What about spices? Try buying local cinnamon and nutmeg in Nebraska. Of course you can't; these are tropical products, as are vanilla, bananas, coffee, tea, and black pepper. Who cooks without at least one of these? You can find soy sauce and curry powder in groceries, but what about basmati rice? What about whole dried ginger? What about sesame seeds? You might find these things at a mega-mart, but like most Europeans in historical times, you'll get a precious little container of dubious quality that cost you a mint. There are other cultures – tropical cultures – let's say, whose cuisines use these things with much greater regularity.

Define Gourmet:

I would argue that there is no such thing as gourmet food or gourmet food items. Aren't gourmet foods just those that someone else rates as *tres magnifique*? Expensive doesn't mean good: if caviar makes you yak, it could cost a thousand dollars, but to you it'll be just icky fish eggs. Exclusive might be another synonym for gourmet, but what is hard to find for one person might be run of

the mill for someone else. Recall that the poor laborers in the New England of our colonial days demanded that they not be fed lobster more than three times a week because it was poverty food. Many foods are common enough, but are not found cheaply (really good green or black tea, for example). It could be that something very similar exists for less money and is being bought all the time by people who use that product much more frequently.

Define Unusual:

A few years ago, offal (innards and organs) was a huge trend in the fine dining restaurant world, giving credit to the statement that one man's trash is another man's tripe. I'll never forget trucking over to a meat-packing plant in search of a sheep stomach for my dear Scottish husband's Thanksgiving haggis recipe. The man I ordered it from must have thought I was a raving lunatic. I was inclined to agree when he handed me a twenty pound box. Here in the Midwest, cow's stomach was all I could find... and who knew it was so much... *bigger*? We ended up using aluminum foil.

Maybe you need an "unusual" holiday ingredient like pickling spices for lutefisk or decent marscarpone for tiramisu. Or maybe you just want some variety in your diet: an alternative starch for dinner, a new variety of eggplant, something fast and frozen besides tater tots. Maybe you need chickpea flour; not because you're making papadums (Indian crispy flatbread), but because you have celiac or some other version of gluten sensitivity. Perhaps you just want to up the protein quotient in your baked goods. There are plenty of unusual things in ethnic markets, but there are even more that you will recognize.

All Roads Lead to India

Westerners once used whole armies to acquire black pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon and other exotic spices, but now all you need is a few dollars and an Indian Market. Throw those horrible, dusty little cans of powder in the trash and assign a micro-grater or coffee grinder to some whole spices. Why are whole spices better? Because the minute you cut into them, just like a watermelon, they start to go bad. The longer they stay in their natural state, the fresher they'll be when you use them. If a nice, mild curry is anywhere on your radar, you need to google, pick a recipe and get some whole spices.

You'll never use curry powder again – unless you're like my husband, who sprinkles it on anything pre-prepared and bland, like a mad Cajun with a bottle of hot sauce. The Indian Markets carry lots of different curry powders as well as whole spices such as anise seed, black pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, coriander, cumin, fennel, dried ginger, mustard seed, and star anise. Everything from roasted potatoes to grilled lamb can go from so-so to superb with a whole ground version of one of these spices. You'll smell and taste the difference, even if all you do is make hot cocoa or cider and put a whole cinnamon stick in the cup.

Chickpea flour (or garbanzo bean flour or gram flour) is a fabulous gluten-free substitute for flour. It gives an awesome protein kick to anything and lightens up baked goods such as waffles, pancakes, crepes, cookies, and breads. I now use it as a starchy binder for my home-made granola and its nutty flavor is stupendous for making moist, chewy chocolate chip cookies. Sesame seeds are expensive and come in teeny little jars, but at the Indian markets they come in bags for much less. If you are making sesame cookies, granola, sesame chicken or sesame yeast rolls, this is a much better place to get them. You can get black sesame seeds too, which are pretty on stir-fry and have an intense, complex flavor.

Tea is something the British take seriously and that still goes for inhabitants of many of the countries that were colonized by them, the US included. But our tea has become so weakened down and powdered out that most of what you find in grocery stores has very little of what you're actually paying for: tea. You can buy a



“Whole spices are better because the longer they stay in their natural state, the fresher they’ll be when you use them.”

ridiculously miniscule tin for seven or eight dollars that is supposed to be gourmet and authentic, or you can go to an Indian Market and get some fantastic loose leaf black tea in a huge box for about 4 bucks. I know, you have to strain it, but most people have a strainer. I served iced black tea that I'd made in a few seconds to a friend and she exclaimed, “This is the best tea I've ever had! What's in this?” I smiled. “Tea.” Trust me, it's worth it.

If you still haven't had basmati rice, then you need to run out and get some now. Basmati is a fragrant, fluffy, quick cooking (15 minutes), nutty-tasting, firm rice that is increasingly available here. It appeals to many Americans because it is not sticky and every grain separates nicely during cooking. Indian markets have many brands and varieties, but if you are not sure which one to get, ask the people who work in the store. Most of the time I say, “Which one do you use?” This works great for soy sauce too, because the employees aren't going to buy the cheapest one, but they won't buy the most expensive one either. Basmati, a pan with a lid and an inch more water than the top level of the rice is all you need. Brown basmati takes longer to cook, but I like it much more than most other brown rice varieties.

Other things to also look for at the Indian Market:

- Lentils (or Daal) in yellow, red, green or brown.
- Coconut milk and dried coconut (much better than what groceries offer) sweetened and unsweetened.
- Chutneys such as Mango Pickle to accompany meats, fish and potatoes.
- Whole wheat and regular flatbread, or roti in the refrigerated section.
- Fresh produce such as okra, eggplants, melons, turnips, fresh ginger and a wide assortment of Indian veggies.
- Frozen prepared food like curries, pakoras and samosas (I know, but sometimes you need a break).
- Desserts like gulab jamun: a kind of doughnut soaked in syrup (my kids love these).

The Glorious Middle East

Middle Eastern markets are not to be underestimated. You can find a lot more than grape leaves and rosewater. There is small couscous (and the bigger variety as well), bulgur wheat, a great array of dried figs, dates, apricots and other dried fruits. Most of these shops have frozen lamb and goat: It is great in stews and braises. The flatbread is gorgeous, tasty and it can be kept in the freezer to be thawed when you need a piece. That pita bread you're getting in the megamart will look sad in comparison. There is Mahamul: addictive little pastries made with semolina flour and filled with dried fruit. You'll see a lot of spices here too, as well as good black tea.

"For those seeking starches and flour with no gluten, Asian groceries have many to offer."

Asia: It's Really, Really Big

An Eastern Asian Market is going to have an enormous range of foods and produce. "Asian" is a pathetic abbreviation for so many wonderful culinary cultures, but it is a fact that most markets outside of large coastal cities won't specialize much and are generally stocked with a range of products from China, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Korea. You can usually find nice produce, including fresh ginger, snow peas, fresh coriander, cilantro, bamboo shoots, bok choy, eastern greens and cabbages, as well as different types of tofu. Chile paste and sauces are very common, and although fish sauce may not be your thing, you cannot make good Pad Thai without it.

"A narrow, limited diet is not a healthy one... a well-travelled palette can be had right here in the Midwest."

As Marco Polo saw, noodles will be there in abundance, made from just about anything you can think of. There are also plenty of different rices, especially Jasmine, a fragrant variety much like basmati. In general, Japanese soy sauces tend to be quite mild, but Asian sauces can be much more robust; good for cooking where intense flavor is wanted. For those seeking starches and flour with no gluten, Asian groceries offer flour made from rice, tapioca, millet, sorghum and buckwheat (which is related to rhubarb and not actually wheat). You can also find arrowroot powder, the single best thickener for Asian style cooking. It is wonderful because unlike cornstarch, it can be added straight into boiling liquid and will not clump. Check out the frozen fish – and don't forget to try the kimchee.

South of Many Borders

Latin Markets were one of the first ethnic groceries I learned about when my Venezuelan friends introduced me to arepas. These are little corncakes made from very fine grits, called harina, which are hydrated, then toasted on the outside and stuffed with ham and cheese for breakfast. Be warned: they are good enough to make a grown man cry. There are many varieties of harina, from course and gritty to light and floury. Most are used for tortillas, the wrappings for tamales and for thickeners in stews. Pumpkin seeds and pine nuts are common, and not in itty bitty packages. You can find tomatoes, tomatillos (a tomato relative and the stuff they make salsa verde from) and many varieties of chiles: hot, mild, fresh, dried, smoked, canned, pickled and fermented.

There is other good produce, including plantains (a starchy banana relative), yuca (not yucca like in the Mojave Desert, this is a starchy sweet root) and many wonderful tropical fruits that will usually be much fresher and riper because these markets experience high turnover.

What About the Rest of the World?

It's a big, tasty world out there and we are lucky to be able to sample it. As you shop, you will see a lot of crossover in these ethnic markets. So many African dishes rely on New World Foods like chiles and corn, as well as the Old World staples of okra, squashes and rice. An Indian or Asian market is likely to have a lot of the things an African chef might be seeking. Increasingly, these foods are getting their own market share and their own markets. Less and less, do we see many markets specifically offering European foods simply because our country was early overrun with European foldaways. Still, it behooves us to seek out Italian cheeses, French wines, German sausages, Lithuanian tortes and Jewish hallah bread wherever we can find them, as close to the source as possible.

A narrow, limited diet is not a healthy one: humans were meant to eat and thrive on a broad, varied diet. A well-travelled palette can be had right here in the Midwest. Ethnic markets are places to gently educate palettes and they are also havens for people with restrictions of diet or taste: you can decide what you like and what you want to try. Go ahead, start your own odyssey of food, a kind of Food Trek: to explore strange new worlds of flavor, to seek out new civilizations of taste and boldly go where no man has gone before! Where first? As Captain Kirk famously said when asked what heading to plot, he flipped his hand at the star-filled screen and said, "Out there... thataway."



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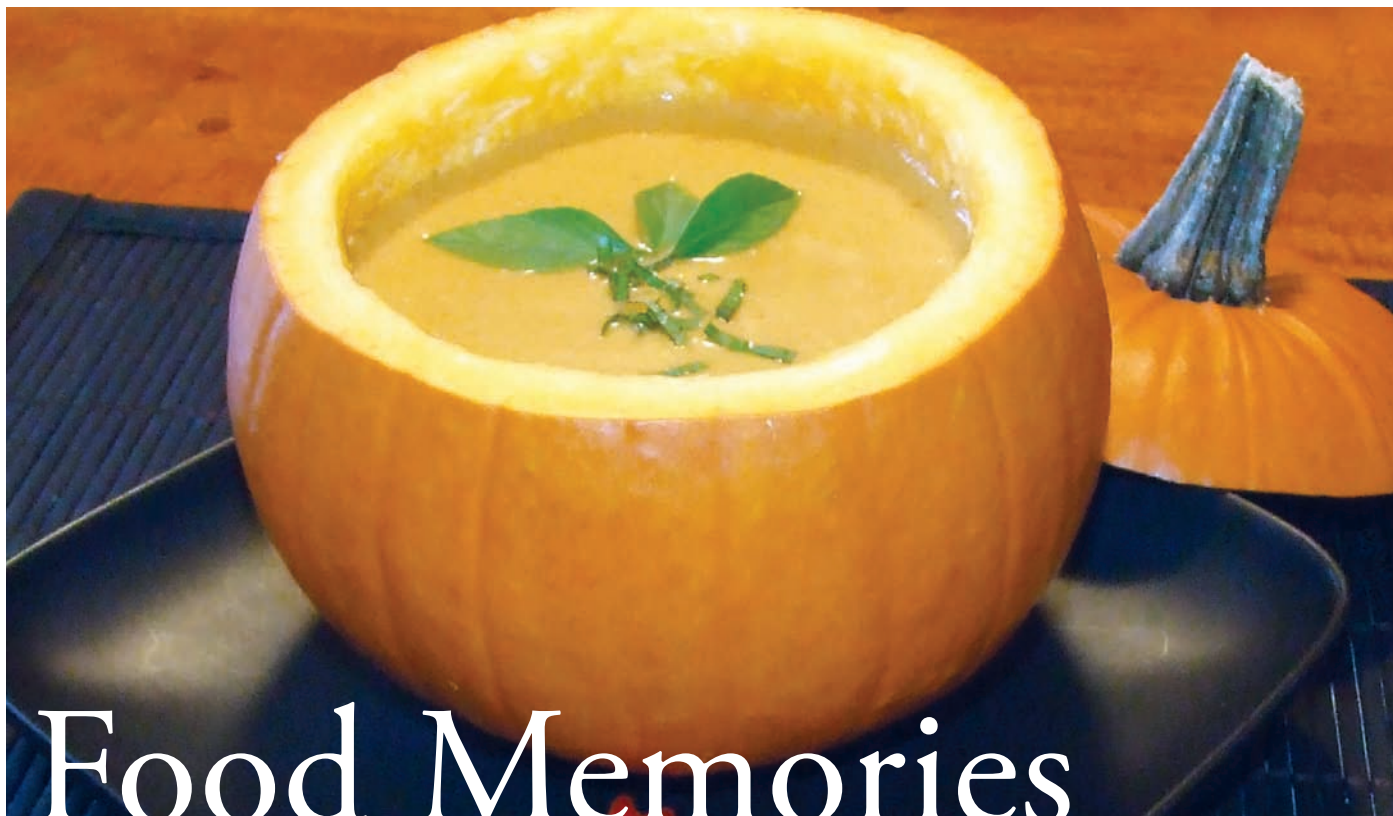
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Food Memories

Thai Pumpkin Bisque by Charles Schussel

fsmomaha.com

Why is comfort food so popular at many restaurants nowadays? Because a big bowl of mac and cheese is more than just a way to fuel your body, it's also a time machine that takes you back to your childhood. Certain aromas evoke an almost instantaneous memory of grandma's house and the joys of families coming together for the holidays. Just think of what the smell of fresh homemade bread baking in the oven conjures in your mind.

"Cooking is a way to not only feed your body, but a way to create lifelong memories."

With this in mind, I started quizzing my friends at work. I asked them to tell me the very first thing that popped into their minds when I asked them to think of a memorable food.

Many of you instantly thought of a pumpkin pie at a past holiday dinner. In my case though, my experiences as a chef come into play and I think back to a wine dinner I did at Nick's Main Street Grill years ago. The soup course was a Thai inspired spicy pumpkin-coconut bisque. We served it in bowls made out of small pumpkins surrounded by fall leaf shapes cut out of red, yellow and orange bell peppers (much easier than it sounds).

The soup and the dinner were a huge hit. I'd like to invite you to try my pumpkin soup recipe (with a few new twists). My hope is that whether it becomes a family favorite at your next Thanksgiving dinner or just a fun new recipe to try out, you'll discover that cooking with family and friends is a way to not only feed your physical body, but a way to create lifelong memories to warm the soul.

Thai Pumpkin Bisque (yields 6 servings)

Ingredients:

- 2 Tbsp butter
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 3 cloves minced garlic
- 2 Tbsp Thai red curry paste
- 1/2 tsp ground allspice
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 2 cups unsweetened coconut milk
- 3 cups canned pure pumpkin
- 2 Tbsp lime juice
- Zest of 1 lime
- 3 Tbsp sugar
- 1 bunch Thai or regular basil
- 1 bunch cilantro

Directions:

Melt butter in sauce pan and sauté onion over medium heat until softened. Add garlic, red curry and allspice, then stir for 30 seconds. Add the next six ingredients and simmer over medium heat for 15-20 minutes, adding salt and pepper to taste. Puree soup in a blender, in the pan with a hand blender or leave it as is for a more rustic soup. Serve with chopped basil and cilantro as a garnish.

For a special celebration, serve in small individual pumpkins garnished with fall leaf shapes cut out of red, yellow and orange bell peppers (leaf shaped cutters available at Williams Sonoma). For an extra special treat, add shrimp and mussels at the end of cooking and simmer for about 3-5 minutes until shrimp are cooked and mussels open.

Cheese Romance

Comté

by Miranda McQuillan

Cheese is culture, it is life. This has long been my credo and when I was asked to share my passion with the readers of *Food & Spirits Magazine*, I was thrilled. My mind raced back through the many Cheese Clubs, tastings and conversations I have had in my many years courting the wonderful, glorious – and mostly delicious – cheese. So much cheese! How can I choose one kind? Then it came to me: start with the cheese that made you love cheese. Seeing as how January 1st, 2012 will be the fifteen year anniversary, here is the story of my first cheese romance. Once upon a time, 15 years ago...

When I was a young, fresh faced, 20 year-old American girl, I moved to the region of France called the Franche Comté, just below the Alsace-Lorraine on the Northeast side of France. Bordering both Switzerland and Germany, you see a wonderful, predominantly Swiss influence with perfect German undertones. With the hearty, simple and deep flavors of the region, from the Jura Mountains to the Alps and a Bavarian influence from the East, the food is a true testament to artisan cheese making. This is where I found the most humble, simple and special cheese: *Comté*.

Comté is made by and through 300 small dairies in the region, not by larger cheese making facilities, which speaks to France's

commitment to the cultural integrity of their vast array of cheeses. Comté is a raw milk cheese (unpasteurized), and thus has a deeper, richer flavor while still having that wonderful sharpness of an aged Swiss. It is indeed more subtle than its sister Gruyère, but its flavor is more complex. Though Comté may cost a little more than Gruyère, it is worth it, especially if you want a wonderful, versatile, raw-milk cheese. Comté is the perfect choice for a cheese that will lend itself to any of your favorite wines, accompanied by some raw almonds, a ripe pear and a hearty, rustic bread or cracker.

The best way to buy Comté is freshly cut from a wheel, wrapped for you by your cheese monger from a bigger piece; not precut and wrapped before it gets to the store. Any cheese is better this way, fresh and aromatic, but with Comté it is paramount. Their rinds should be a gray-brown, pebbly in texture, moist to the touch and the inside should be a yellow-ivory color. Choose a piece that has the least rind. In Nebraska, the purveyor is not supposed to charge you for the rind; a good question to ask the cheese monger, if you are a traveling cheese connoisseur.

For us, it is the slight differences that make our sense of taste sing. Consistency, aging, even the time the animal is milked each day and the herds legacy all contribute to flavor, and thus to your guarantee that that cheese will always be what you remembered the time you sat down at the prix fixe dinner at Les Trois Sanges restaurant with your copines and tasted that Comté for the first time. I spent many meals with my global friends and a slab of Comté de Gruyère. Memories are what food is all about. For some people, they are the only tangible things from a time that has passed, but whose influence and importance never will. To put a spin on a very good ending, go forth and explore the wonderful world of cheese.



Five Favorite Appetizers

by John Horvatinovich



Jisa's cheese curds are named after their source, Jisa's Farmstead Cheese (Brainard, NE).

Fusion Wrap (Stokes Grill & Bar)

Stokes has an award-winning wine list, which is a big draw for the restaurant. However, it's the colorful and well-executed Fusion Wrap that brings me back to Stokes every time. The Fusion Wrap is a tortilla with an exciting array of ingredients. Lightly seared Ahi tuna seasoned with coarse salt and fresh cracked pepper is layered with a crisp vegetable slaw; a tortilla holds all the ingredients together. The chef artfully plates the wrap, dawns a blackberry-wasabi sauce, garnishes with a handful of fresh cilantro and oblique cuts of fresh green onions.

Baked Scampi (Jams)

Jams is an Omaha original and has stood the test of time in a very difficult restaurant market. The Baked Scampi with Havarti Cheese is one of my favorites on the static menu at Jams. Tender shrimp bathing in a delicious cream sauce, topped with a generous portion of havarti cheese and toasted to a golden brown... excuse me while I place a to-go order.

Wasabi Stinger (Hiro Sushi & Hiro 88)

The Wasabi Stinger at Hiro is an eight-piece sushi roll that blends traditional sushi techniques with rich flavorful ingredients. The inside of the roll consists of tempura shrimp, cream cheese, sliced cucumber and de-seeded fresh jalapeño. Once those ingredients are secured into the sushi rice, the entire roll is covered with shredded crab meat and topped with two fantastic sauces: a midnight black eel sauce and a cool wasabi cream sauce. The textures of crispy tempura and crunchy jalapeño combined with the richness of cream cheese and the striking color scheme of the sauce make this one of the most well-balanced sushi rolls around. A "must have" any time of year.

Calamari (Saigon Surface)

Saigon Surface is the inspiration of Saigon Restaurant, the family business that has been operating in Omaha for 15 years. I have a few benchmarks that a restaurant should execute flawlessly; one of those is calamari. At Saigon, the calamari is done simply with Asian

spices and a light batter to protect the mouthwatering bites. Sweet and fiery chili sauce accompanies the dish – try that first bit without sauce, you'll thank me later.

Jisa's Cheese Curds and Lucky Bucket Onion Rings (Blanc Burgers and Bottles)

Onion rings... I crave them often, but am too often disappointed. However, at Blanc's, I went back to the miniaturized shopping cart full of Lucky Bucket lager onion rings numerous times to get my fix. They're the best onion rings I have ever had. The onion was tender – not stringy like most recipes – and the Lucky Bucket beer batter was light, crunchy and flavorful.

My absolute favorite starter on the menu was Jisa's cheese curds, named after their source, Jisa's Farmstead Cheese in Brainard, Nebraska. The serving dish is a miniature fry basket filled with the warm cheese curds. The cheese was fun, tasty and went perfectly with the side of sweet, roasted tomatillo chutney.

There you have it, five of my favorite appetizers in Omaha. Get out there, try something new, or just visit an old favorite. Whatever you choose, make it a delicious one.

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Raw Milk

Fighting for the Right to Choose

by Summer Miller

The debate over the value – or lack of value – of milk stretches from the dairy farmer to the the parent. Pasteurized and raw milk have been labeled as a glass of liquid poison by one group or the other in multiple ways and fashions. But for many, the battle is really about a person or parent's right to choose what is best for his/her family.

“Raw milk supporters swear that raw milk is nutritionally better and can cure or prevent any number of ailments; allergies, asthma and ADHD among them.”

Trying to find statistics on raw milk production is nearly impossible. The Weston A. Price Foundation is the main advocacy body for raw milk dairy producers. Farmers list much of the information about the number of raw milk farms per state voluntarily. Because of the controversial nature of raw milk, some farmers may not want to be listed, which may have an affect on the true number of farmers producing and selling raw milk and raw milk products. Statistics sited on the Weston A. Price Foundation website states that nearly 9.4 million people in the United States consume raw milk (2007 CDC FoodNet survey).

The CDC randomly sampled and interviewed respondents across 10 states (California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, Oregon and Tennessee). Of the total number of people interviewed in those 10 states, three percent or 528 people had consumed raw milk in the past seven days. The foundation applied that three percent to the total population of the United States to arrive at nine million raw milk consumers.

Raw milk regulation varies by state, according to the Weston A. Price Foundation, a nutrition education organization dedicated to promoting the value of raw milk. Raw milk can be sold legally at the farm in 27 states. Another 10 states have active cow share programs and about 10 states can sell raw milk in retail stores. Those who want to obtain raw milk in Nebraska simply have to find a farm that sells it and drive there to pick it up. Farms are not allowed to promote, advertise or distribute raw milk in retail environments. In Iowa it is illegal to sell raw milk or raw milk products except for cheese that has been aged more than 60 days.

In states where raw milk sales are illegal, dedicated raw milk consumers have found a loophole: cow sharing. The idea is that the



government cannot stop a person from drinking milk from his own cow. People buy portions of a cow and enter into boarding contracts with farmers. The farmer tends to the cow much in the same way a person would board a horse.

For people like Laura Chisholm, she's thankful from-the-farm raw milk sales are legal in Nebraska and that cow sharing isn't necessary. However, she and other raw milk supporters would like to see the accessibility of raw milk increase.

"It's not about convincing someone to drink raw milk," Chisholm said. "Do the research. Visit the farms. Go to a conventional farm and look at the environment. Come to a grass-fed farm and look at the environment. It's one of those things you have to be comfortable with and if you aren't, you aren't."

While Chisholm and other raw milk loyalist are not trying to convince others to jump on the raw milk bandwagon, other organizations actively tell people to steer clear of it. The National Dairy Association, Midwest Dairy Association, Centers for Disease Control, Federal Food and Drug Administration and American Academy of Pediatrics all advise against consuming raw milk. Courtney Pinard, Ph.D., a research scientist with the Gretchen Swanson Center for Human Nutrition, helped to partially explain why raw milk enthusiasts are so passionate about the cause, even when the risks seem so high:

"In addition to enzymes, raw milk also contains many of the good bacteria also found in yogurt that aid in digestion."

"Many people believe the enzymes in raw milk aid digestion and calcium absorption; however, their specific health benefits are debated within the scientific community. In addition to enzymes, raw milk also contains many of the good bacteria also found in yogurt that aid in digestion," Pinard said. "One important distinction for raw milk is that the cows are typically grass fed, which reduces bad bacteria and is better for the cows. Grass is the cow's natural source of food, rather than corn feed which is fed to cows in concentrated animal feeding operations [CAFOs]. This corn feed speeds up the growth process and is also intermixed with antibiotics to fend off disease, since the corn feed is not easily digested by cows."

Chisholm and raw milk supporters everywhere swear that raw milk is nutritionally better for them and can cure or prevent any number of ailments; allergies, asthma and ADHD among them. The FDA says those beliefs are unfounded, but Fallon Morell says the proof is in personal experience.

"Passionate parents have seen the amazing recoveries of children who are driving this [raw milk] movement. You cannot tell a parent who has had this experience that they cannot have raw milk. They just aren't going to put up with it," said Sally Fallon Morell, president of The Weston A. Price Foundation and founder of the Campaign for Real Milk.

Chisholm is one of those parents. She has a daughter who can't drink pasteurized milk because of allergies, drinks raw milk without problems.

"A lot of [customers] came to us because they had to be dairy free," Chisholm said. "Everyone else gets sick during cold and flu season and our family doesn't. I attribute it to the probiotics and enzymes in the milk."

The Chisholm's sell about 30 gallons of raw milk per day. Their customers are mostly from Lincoln and Omaha, and depending on the time of year, pay anywhere from \$6.50-\$8.50 per gallon. Even with the higher price per gallon over conventional supermarket milk, the Chisholm's still struggle due to the expense of maintaining

organic high-quality feed for their 28 Jersey cows. Organic pasteurized milk at the grocery store costs about \$6.50 per gallon.

Morell, who founded the Campaign for Real Milk in 1999, says much of the information distributed by the government about raw milk is incorrect. Her organization is out to provide the other side of the story while creating universal access to clean, raw milk in every part of the United States.

"The number one reason the dairy industry is against raw milk is that the people who produce raw milk get paid a lot more per gallon. The people in the industry get paid about \$1 per gallon, which is what they were paid in World War II. The dairy industry does not want to compete with the higher prices raw milk producers are getting."

Morell contends that government studies are based on raw milk from CAFOs and not from smaller, organic grass-fed dairy farms, as they should be. The Weston A. Price foundation only recommends full fat, raw milk consumed from the latter.

"There are two kinds of raw milk: Raw milk for pasteurization and raw milk for human consumption. The USDA is talking about the kind of milk they regulate for pasteurization. That milk is not safe. I wouldn't drink that milk raw. Not in a million years," said Chisholm.

The desire for raw milk has increased with the back to the farm food movements that started gaining momentum in the early 1990s and have yet to slow down. It's about taking control of the food system that has lost the trust of many consumers. Flawed though it may be, the United States still has the safest food system in the world. People on all sides recommend reviewing the research and making a personal choice.

"People can't choose it if it's not available. I want that choice to be available," said Morell.



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5

FAVORITE BURGER JOINTS

by John Horvatinovich

One of the problems with our favorite burger joints is that they are clear across town when we have a craving. For me, perhaps one of the best litmus tests for a burger joint is if I'm willing to drive to it or not. Although it's not an extensive list, here are a few places worth a trek across town.

Blanc Burgers and Bottles

It's one of the many new burger joints on the block, but this place has the menu and attitude to stand out. The small Kansas City-based company adjusted the menu to the Omaha market by teaming with local purveyors to give the menu a more tailored fit.

"Blanc Burgers offers daily specials like the \$100 Burger, The Sheen Burger and the Hannibal Lecter Burger."

The Bison Burger is a combination of free range bison, mayonnaise, sweet red onion, fried egg, pepperjack cheese, butter lettuce and peppadew jam. Okay, wait; let's back that ingredient train up – peppadew? Peppadew is a hybrid fruit found in South Africa (think of it as thick red bell pepper on steroids). The jam is made in-house and adds a sweet, tangy flavor with some mild spice. The flavors of this burger are incredible; each bite added another

dimension of taste. Fennel seeds on the Le Quartier bun added a wonderful anise flavor to this remarkable burger.

The restaurant offers daily specials like the \$100 Burger, The Sheen Burger and the Hannibal Lecter Burger. The Hannibal is a six ounce lamb patty stuffed with a foie gras and pepper Boursin cheese, topped with mayonnaise, apple-wood smoked bacon, watercress and a Chianti goat cheese butter, served on a Le Quartier four seed Brioche. All I need is some fava beans and a nice bottle of Chianti.

Sinful Burger

The newest of the burger joints in the Metro, Sinful Burger opened to the dining public during the summer of 2011. Sinful Burger has a sports theme with HD televisions, sports bar activities and an exciting menu of great bar food. In just a short time, the restaurant has made a name for itself.

"Sinful Burger has a sports theme with HD televisions, great bar food and a scratch menu with a major focus on mouth-watering burgers."

Boasting a scratch menu with a major focus on mouth-watering burgers, the theme of the menu items are, of course, sinful with a

menu section of the seven deadly burgers. Each of the burgers has a unique twist. The Wrath burger, for example, features Swiss cheese, jalapenos and chipotle mayo. Another favorite is the Greed burger, which is topped with two mozzarella sticks and covered in chili. All of the burgers are marinated with several ingredients and most have delicious melted cheese sandwiched between burger patties. Fries are cut fresh in-house daily.

Tommy Colina's Kitchen

Celebrating their first year, Tommy Colina's Kitchen opened last October in the old Don Carmelo's space at 35th and Farnam. The restaurant is a locally-owned, independent restaurant named after the partners' children: Tommy, Collin and Melina. To label the menu as comfort food is too vague because Tommy Colina's offers so much more. From the quality of ingredients to the enthusiasm of the staff, it all adds up to a great dining experience.

"At Tommy Colina's, each steak burger is a half-pound of choice chuck sourced from the Midwest and ground fresh daily."

At TCK, each steak burger is a half pound of choice chuck, sourced from the Midwest and ground fresh daily (never frozen). The Tijuana Taxi is my favorite with a delicious smoked jalapeno and bacon relish and smooth melted pepper jack cheese. Another crowd favorite is the Triple B with maple bacon, Bleu cheese and imported Brie. If you want decadence, then order the B.

Dinker's Bar and Grill

No burger joint list would be complete without some of the classic burger joints in the metro. An Omaha original, Dinker's is still serving up one of the best quality burgers in the Metro area and winning over new generations of burger fans. Dinker's opened in 1965 when "Dinker" Frank Synowiecki opened the small neighborhood bar in the heart of Sheely Town, a Polish immigrant area. Dinker's is a friendly family establishment and the staff are some of the most hospitable people around.

"An Omaha original, Dinker's is known for the mouthwatering Haystack Burger."

Dinker's is known for the Haystack Burger; a quarter pound fresh, USDA choice beef patty, American cheese, honey-smoked ham and a fried Free Range egg, served on a grilled Kaiser bun. I am



not in the area often enough to enjoy this mouthwatering burger, but man it is worth it when I finally do make it back in there.

Stella's Bar and Grill

Located in Bellevue, Stella's has had a loyal following of locals singing their praises for generations. Recently, they started turning heads nationally. From national newspapers and magazines to television shows, many are taking notice of this tiny, nostalgic burger joint in the middle of the heartland.

"Stella's started turning heads nationally newspapers, magazines and TV shows taking notice of this nostalgic burger joint."

A new food challenge at Stella's, "The Stellanator", is a towering stack of six burger patties, six fried eggs, six slices of cheese and 12 slices of bacon, lettuce, tomato, pickles, fried onions, peanut butter and jalapeños. I hear a Man vs. Food chant in the background – do you? A signature chalkboard menu, burgers served on napkins and a food challenge like The Stellanator ensure that Stella's will be around the area as long as they choose.

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Raw Food

More Than a Fad Diet? by Rachel Mulder

There seems to be a new fad diet every couple of weeks, and one that has recently been growing in popularity is the “Raw Food Diet”. If you haven’t heard about it, you obviously aren’t very trendy – shame on you.

What exactly is a Raw Food Diet?

A Raw Food Diet is one that consists of 70 percent or more uncooked and unprocessed foods. However, this does not mean that all you eat is salad. Though it is true that a major portion of a raw food diet is comprised mainly of fresh fruits, vegetables and raw nuts, there are countless dishes that can be adapted to fit the raw lifestyle; lasagna, burritos, crepes, apple pie, cheesecake, scrambled eggs and even fried ice cream. As long as it’s not heated above 104-118 degrees Fahrenheit (depending on who you talk to), the food is still considered raw.

“There are countless dishes that can be adapted to fit the raw lifestyle; lasagna, burritos... even fried ice cream.”

Meals can be prepared with a dehydrator, food processor, blender, or just good old-fashioned chopping. Preparation difficulty ranges from idiotically simple to annoyingly complex. Just like traditional cooking, it gets easier and more intuitive the more you do it. Raw

foodism isn’t a diet in the modern connotation of the term; it’s a lifestyle, just like omnivorousness, vegetarianism, or alcoholism.

Why Raw Food?

The premise of raw foodism is based on the claim that natural foods are better for the body than processed, unnatural food. The over-processing of food in our current culture has been a major contributor to the tremendous health problems we have in this country. This is evident by the increase in obesity, diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer’s, etc.

A lot of people don’t realize that nearly all of these diseases can be prevented, or even treated, just by changing the way you treat your body. Everything you put in your body is used to repair and renew your cells: it literally becomes a part of you. Hence the phrase, “you are what you eat”. It makes sense that eating fresh, healthy, nutrient-dense foods would sustain a healthy, well-balanced person and that the inverse would not.

Any diet that eliminates synthetic chemicals and preservatives is obviously “better” than one that is full of them, but what is so unique about the raw food diet is its emphasis on purity. Enzymes are proteins that act as a catalyst for digestion. When you cook food, it destroys the natural enzymes and makes digestion difficult, leading to problems like constipation, bloating, gas and fatigue. It might seem odd, but on a raw diet all of your food gets completely broken down so you almost never fart, which is a pretty nice side benefit.





“Eat as much as you want and still lose weight because raw food fills you up much faster.”

When food is processed or cooked it loses enzymes, vitamins and minerals. Why does that matter? We all know how good vitamins and minerals are for us, and that's why most of us swallow a bunch of giant, foul-tasting pills in the morning. Multi-vitamins are definitely better than nothing, but if you're taking poor-quality supplements from the supermarket, you're probably not getting what's being advertised.

A hidden fact about artificial supplements is that most can't be completely broken down by the digestive system, which means your body can't utilize them. Even if they do reach the bloodstream, the body can't always assimilate synthetic vitamins and they get filtered out through your excretory systems. Put simply, if you aren't taking a high-quality – preferably food-derived vitamins – you're just flushing your money down the toilet in a conveniently literal manner.

If you're one of those people who are constantly looking up bizarre diet plans to lose their lovehandles or muffin-top, why not try this one? Google some images of raw foodists online; they are all glowy, svelte, and beautiful; looking like shimmering angels sent to earth to make us all feel bad about our dull hair, acne, big butts and back fat. If one look at Mimi Kirk isn't enough to convince you, nothing is. The woman is 72 and looks better than most people in their 20's.

What's really great about raw food is that you can eat as much of it as you want and still lose weight because raw food fills you up much faster than cooked or processed food does, and it satiates you for much longer. Your body naturally knows how to utilize and absorb the nutrients, as opposed to processed or cooked food, so you don't end up with all the waste that attaches itself to your body in the form of cellulite. This lack of waste lingering in your body also pretty much guarantees that you never get sick and that your body is running at its highest efficiency.

You might be concerned that this seemingly restrictive plan would get boring. It can if you don't mix it up, but so would a diet consisting of all hamburgers. I know we all get a desperate burger urge from time to time, but you wouldn't necessarily have to give up that pleasure: a lot of raw foodists have the occasional cooked meal. The idea of raw foodism is to be healthy and happy; constant denial

doesn't really suit the program. It wouldn't be much fun to habitually turn down a friend's invitation to go out because you'll ruin your diet. Many people adopt a raw-until-dinner system which gives a lot of freedom while still maintaining most of the benefits.

The change in how you feel will be enough to keep you going. You'll begin to realize how much the things you used to eat effect how you felt and you won't want to go back to the standard American diet. A raw diet doesn't have to be any more expensive than a standard diet either; there are plenty of ways to be a frugal raw foodist. Though it might not seem like there are many places in Omaha to get the components necessary for a raw diet, local businesses like Jane's Health Market in Benson and No Name Nutrition have a lot of products that can't usually be found at the normal grocery store.

Organic produce has become a lot more prevalent and affordable. Stores like Baker's and HyVee will usually have everything you need. Besides, there's always Whole Foods and Trader Joe's for more exotic yuppie goods. If you do want to go out for a meal or if you're just curious about the concept, McFoster's Natural Kind Cafe has a lot of raw options. Jane's Health Market has been doing a Raw Food Brunch for over a year every Saturday from 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

This seems like the most perfect thing in the world, so why aren't you doing it? The whole concept can seem daunting, especially in Nebraska where beef is big. Again, going all-raw isn't for everyone; it takes a lot of willpower to change your life so drastically and I wouldn't recommend going all-raw initially. It's a process that takes time. Start by drinking fresh juice every morning or swapping out one meal for a raw one or snacking on raw trail mix instead of crackers. These things in and of themselves, can make a huge difference in your health and disposition and will prompt you to make more changes.

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The Rating Game

by John Finocchiaro

Any of us who have perused a wine or food magazine with a featured wine section has seen the proverbial wine reviews. Apparently, it isn't enough to merely recommend a particular wine. We are Americans, and we need our rankings; we need our scoreboard. We need a hierarchy: a value assigned to our bottle. Numbers, letters, checks, stars, pluses, minuses or – my favorite – “puffs” (what the hell is a puff?). We've seen them all, and we love them because our competitive, capitalistic nature demands that we declare winners and losers.

To allow for an unquantified evaluation would constitute unfinished business. Like the Emperor in his colosseum looking down upon the gladiators, we await the thumbs up or thumbs down verdict on the life of each of his subjects. Will this wine make the cut, or will it perish into mediocrity? Oh, such drama. After all of the swirling, sniffing, sipping and spitting, is the rating game serving any real purpose? After all, isn't the evaluation of wine, for the most part, a purely subjective endeavor? Let's take a closer look at the rating game.

“Wine ratings can questionable and certainly way too much emphasis can be placed on the almighty ‘score’.”

For pure entertainment value, wine tasting notes are hard to beat. Check out these descriptors from a wine publication plucked randomly from my coffee table: “Hedonistic...fleshy...wild...tempting...soft and juicy...tight, lean, racy...mouthwatering...pretty... silky... firm... dark and lush... like raw silk... warm and inviting... full-bodied and supple... taut and lean... a riveting feel underneath ... cocoa nibs... a touch of heat... deep and brooding... intense... very stylish... attractive... sleek, elegant... a mix of animal, leather, cherry and spice... a long smoky finish... truly impressive”. OK, enough already; I feel like I'm in a brothel.

Or perhaps this curious melange of verbosity: “Shades of tar... decaying leaf... slate... mineral... graphite... loam... cedar... oak... sandalwood... iron... chalky... floral... fresh lilies...” You've got to hand it to those writers. Anyone who can describe a wine in terms of rocks and dirt and somehow make it sound appealing is definitely talented. Maybe I should be looking for wine at Home Depot – or Lanoha Nurseries.

Is the rating game corrupt? Without pointing fingers, it can be quite coincidental just how many highly rated wines seem to pay for advertising in those magazines. The advertising dollars of the few should not tarnish the evaluations of all rated wines as a whole. Then, there are some publications that do not include advertisements at all, which makes it pretty difficult to question the integrity of their respective reviews.

Even so, it is entirely possible to go too far with the whole rating game. I will long remember a

particular encounter while attending a wine dinner at a wonderful French restaurant some years ago. At a tasting of Chilean wines, I opined on the third wine presented: “I like this.” Not exactly a profound commentary on my part. To my surprise, the gentleman across the table leapt at the chance to pin me down.

“Would you rate it a 90?” he said.

Feeling a bit sheepish, I responded, “ Oh, I don't know. Maybe high 80's.”

With total confidence, he responded, “I'd rate it between a 91 and 92”.

It immediately occurred to me that I may have just tasted my very first 91.5 point rated wine. Having spent my entire adult life in the wine business, I can honestly say that I had never tasted a 91.5 rated wine. It was as if the wine was void of a producer, appellation or vintage; it was only a number. I couldn't help but think when decimals and fractions are needed to rate a wine, perhaps we've gone too far.

If you like a particular wine, buy it. Drink it, share it, enjoy and appreciate it. Somewhere over the course of time, our insecurities over selecting wine may have caused us to doubt our own palates. We needed the security blanket of a rating to comfortably hide behind, for fear of – God forbid – picking the “wrong” wine. Do not doubt your own palate. Find a restaurant, wine shop, or wine bar that allows you to venture out of your comfort zone and try new wines. You will absolutely love it.

Wine ratings can be quite entertaining. They are sometimes questionable and certainly way too much emphasis can be placed on the almighty ‘score’ that a wine receives. However, to anyone who has spent \$25 on a lousy bottle, I say a rating or two may have saved your evening - or at least improved it significantly.

If we could taste every wine we desired, there would be no need for ratings, but we can't. As much as I disdain the idea of someone else's palate deciding what I like, I must admit that a good rating or trusted wine confidant at your local wine shop can prove invaluable. I love discovering new wines, new jewels, new varieties, but trial and error can be time consuming, frustrating and expensive. To all those wine reviewers who directed me to new and wonderful discoveries, I say “thank you”; keep up the good work.





Crafting Cocktails

As more Midwest bar-goers are seeking to replace quantity with quality when it comes to a night out, craft cocktails are quickly becoming the distinguishing factor of the elite lounge setting. In addition, on-line forums, smart phone apps, and social networking technologies quickly promote new products and trends, creating higher expectations in service environments. The combined result is a growing demand for the skilled bar professional with specialized knowledge, tools, and training.

In pursuit of the ultimate potation, cocktail enthusiasts can become frustrated with the level of inconsistency from bar to bar, and even from night to night in the same establishment. Prior to the recent rise in enthusiasm for classic and craft cocktails, and prior to a market shift in service expectations, there was no real need for bartenders who could do more than pour a Crown and Coke. However, the elevated demand for both product knowledge and cocktail crafting skills has created the perfect environment for the professional bartender to thrive.

In June, 2011, Wilderness Ridge Restaurant & Lodge of Lincoln hired professional mixologist Jill Cockson, who has worked to create a progressive, craft cocktail menu befitting to their atmosphere and clientele. On March 29th, 2012, Wilderness Ridge, in association with Sterling Distributing Company, hosted the 2012 Bartenders' Open - a mixology competition promoting local, professional bartenders with an affinity for creating original cocktails. Bartenders were invited based on their established reputation as competent and passionate mixologists.

The goal of the event was to connect Lincoln's cocktail enthusiasts with the top bartenders in their market. Each bartender was challenged to create an original cocktail featuring either Tanqueray London Dry Gin or Ketel One Vodka, and at least one house-made ingredient. The public was allowed to cast their vote, alongside the vote of a blind panel of four, headed by Dan Crowell of Sterling

Distributing, and also including Allison Hunt, Kari Lundeen and Binoy Fernandez. The variety of cocktail styles illustrated the potential for craft mixologists to take craft cocktail making in almost any direction. Bar foams, craft bitters, and house-made simple syrups were among the ingredients contributing to the unique nature of each concoction.

Veteran bartender and accomplished mixologist Luke Edson represented The Bourbon Theater in the competition. A progressive Lincoln venue, The Bourbon Theater combines a hip, live music setting with Edson's impressive talent behind the bar. For this event, Luke created the Kaffir Lime Cucumber Coral, a cocktail consisting of Tanqueray London Dry Gin, fresh muddled cucumber, and house-made kaffir lime infused soda, served in a salt-encrusted champagne flute. Judged on aesthetic, originality, and flavor profile, Edson's creation illustrated his consistent ability to push craft cocktail making to ever new extremes.



Professional Mixologist Jill Cockson (second from right) and others at Wilderness Ridge Restaurant & Lodge.

Libation Conversation

The Scofflaw Cocktail by Dan Crowell



The Scofflaw Cocktail... it sounds so dangerous and subversive! In fact, it isn't dangerous at all (in moderation), and since the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, its subversive nature has long since dissipated. The Scofflaw is one of the few classic cocktails to come not from the pre-Prohibition era, but from Prohibition itself.

Having risen largely from the efforts of the Womens' Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League (which at one time counted John D. Rockefeller among its members), this national movement to blamed alcohol for the evils of society culminated in the ratification of the 18th Amendment in 1920.

"The word, 'scofflaw', was posted in the Boston Herald on January 16th, 1924. Within a week, Harry's New York Bar in Paris had created the Scofflaw Cocktail."

Despite its well-meaning intentions, the 'Noble Experiment' wrought havoc on American society, most notably by facilitating the rapid expansion of organized crime in the U.S. during the era. Another regrettable effect of Prohibition was that the true craft of cocktailery, along with its most accomplished practitioners, largely disappeared to Europe, leaving a thirsty country to fend for itself – and illegally at that. This setback radically altered the cocktail landscape in the U.S. for generations, and its effects are still very much present today.

Before we take a closer look at the Scofflaw Cocktail itself, let's shed some light on the name. The term 'scofflaw' itself was also an affectation of Prohibition. Enacting a national ban on beverage

alcohol consumption was one thing; enforcing it was another. After it was initially enacted, most people tried to live by the letter of the 18th Amendment, but by 1923 illegal consumption was a widespread, ongoing problem.

"The original cocktail calls for rye whiskey, dry vermouth, fresh lemon juice and grenadine."

In an effort to help combat this trend, Delcevere King, a member of the Anti-Saloon League, proposed a contest to invent a word "which best expresses the idea of a lawless drinker, menace, scoffer, bad citizen, or whatnot, with the biting power of 'scab' or 'slacker.'" The winning word, 'scofflaw', was posted in the Boston Herald on January 16th, 1924. Within a week, Harry's New York Bar in Paris, in an effort to satirize the situation in America, had created the Scofflaw Cocktail.

The original cocktail calls for rye whiskey, dry vermouth, fresh lemon juice and grenadine. Common variations include adding a dash of orange bitters and at least one uses Chartreuse in place of the grenadine. The version that appeared in the Savoy Cocktail Book called specifically for Canadian whisky, which itself owes a debt of gratitude to Prohibition. Being the nearest neighbor to a whiskey-deprived nation has its advantages, and Canadian whisky producers took full advantage by fueling bootleggers throughout the era and having ready supplies of aged whiskies on hand to supply the hefty demand once Prohibition ended. The U.S. Federal Alcohol Administration allocated the importation of over three million gallons of Canadian whisky in 1933, the year Prohibition was repealed.

The terms 'Canadian whisky' and 'rye whiskey' are sometimes seen as interchangeable, but this is not entirely accurate. While rye is a component in Canadian whisky production, it is not the dominant grain, as would be the legal requirement for any American whiskey designated 'rye whiskey'. These two whiskey types share certain characteristics, but are functionally dissimilar products overall, especially where cocktail applications are concerned. Canadian whiskeys produce a lighter flavor profile and palate presence, while true rye whiskeys tend to be bolder and spicier. Personally, I detect a pleasing hint of fresh dill in the flavor profile of many rye whiskeys that I don't perceive in Canadian whiskeys of comparable quality.

The idea of combining rye whiskey and dry vermouth is not unique to the Scofflaw. Both the Dry Manhattan and Perfect Manhattan utilize both components. It is the interplay of these components with fresh lemon juice and grenadine that set this drink off. As is the case with all cocktails that call for fruit juice, fresh-squeezed juice is always preferred.

When choosing a grenadine, one may want to consider making it from scratch. True grenadine is made from pomegranate juice (the French word for pomegranate is 'grenade'), not from cherry juice or a lab-induced 'equivalent'. The difference between true grenadine and the generally accepted modern version is astounding, and can elevate cocktails like the Scofflaw to new, very lofty heights. Some commercially available grenadines like Stirrings Authentic Grenadine are entirely pomegranate-based, but if you're feeling adventurous, why not make your own? Here's Alton Brown's recipe:

Grenadine Syrup

4 cups pomegranate juice
1/2 cup sugar

1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice

Directions: Place the pomegranate juice, sugar and lemon juice in a 4-quart saucepan set over medium heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the sugar has completely dissolved. Once the sugar has dissolved, reduce the heat to medium-low and cook until the mixture has reduced to 1 1/2 cups, approximately 50 minutes. It should be the consistency of syrup. Remove from the heat and allow to cool in the saucepan for 30 minutes. Transfer to a glass jar and allow to cool completely before covering and storing in the refrigerator for up to 6 months.

As for the cocktail itself, here's the original, as listed in Ted Haigh's excellent *Vintage Spirits and Forgotten Cocktails*:

Scofflaw Cocktail

1-1/2 oz. rye whiskey
1 oz. dry vermouth
3/4 oz. fresh lemon juice
3/4 oz. grenadine

Combine all ingredients with ice and shake. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass and garnish with a lemon twist.

There is some dissention in the cocktail ranks regarding whether to shake or to stir this cocktail. While Dr. Cocktail (the aforementioned Ted Haigh) prefers the shake method (which would be the typical preparation, given the juice content in the drink), DrinkBoy Robert Hess, who is a proponent of stirred drinks in general, believes that stirring this cocktail improves its visual appeal.

Who is right? You be the judge. Make yourself a Scofflaw Cocktail and celebrate your right to do so without fear of prosecution. Or if you'd like to have one made for you, Binoy Fernandez at IO Speak (lower level of the Indian Oven in the Old Market) would be more than happy to oblige.





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YEAST INSPECTION:

Raising a Toast to Nebraska's A+ Offerings

by Jason McLaughlin

We are blessed in Nebraska; great beer is not in short supply here. Let's raise a toast to the Cornhusker State's A+ offerings.

For those who've been following this column through past issues, I'd like to announce a bit of a change in direction. Instead of descriptions of what the foamy head of a beer looks like, etc., we will take a closer inspection of beer lore. Beer is so much more than just sensory perception. Great beer took a magical and masterfully executed journey to get to your glass. Drinking beer is a sacred experience that we will seek to explore and fully celebrate.

"We have beer release parties, festivals and best of all, world-class breweries right here in our backyard."

In Nebraska, better beer has been on a rabid incline as of late. Gone are the days where a skunky European lager in a green bottle is the *crème de la crème* alternative to yellow club soda flavored adjunct pilsner. Welcome to a fast-paced craft beer scene that has at least one better beer related event happening virtually every day and

often times, more than one. We have heavily updated beer blogs, release parties, bottle shops focused solely on better beer, festivals with hundreds, sometimes thousands in attendance and best of all, world class breweries right here in our backyard.

"Omaha & Lincoln have become I-80 'must-stops' for craft beer connoisseurs."

In case you have been in hibernation, we now have 12 breweries in operation and another few in the works. Beer geeks around the nation are clamoring for what we have. Omaha/Lincoln have become an I-80 "must stop" for craft beer connoisseurs. What are they making that everyone wants? Practically every style imaginable – and doing a damn fine job at it. Let's give a few props where they are deserved:

Lucky Bucket in La Vista got off to a thunderous start with the introduction of their Pre-Prohibition Lager, an ode to a time when American lager makers weren't afraid of flavor. Lucky Bucket also makes a solid IPA and a barrel aged Dark Strong Ale to round out their regular releases, which are currently available in six states. Keep your eye out for their new barrel-aged projects; they are destined to shine.

Upstream is home to two Omaha locations (Old Market and Legacy). Along with a solid regular lineup, they have also been cranking out dozens of seasonals every year, including a quickly rotating "Brewer's Whim" series that has showed off just what can be done with a little creativity. They can certainly lay claim to the longest running barrel aging program, which has been pumping out phenomenal oak-aged beers for almost a decade.

Nebraska Brewing Company in Papillion has been on an all-out rampage, distributing across both coasts and winning medals in every major competition possible, including the World Beer Cup and the Great American Beer Festival. A well thought out regular lineup features their staple EOS Hefeweizen and beer geeks across the country have been going berserk for their coveted "Reserve Series" line of barrel aged beers.

Down in Lincoln, Empyrean is celebrating their 20th anniversary, carrying on their tradition of well-crafted English-style ales that can be found in five states. Empyrean continues to lead our region in producing cask conditioned beer: a technique for finishing a beer with live yeast that has historical roots in English beer society.



Zac Triemert (right) founded Lucky Bucket Brewing Co. in 2008 in La Vista, NE.

Nebraska's "Real-Ale" scene is up and coming; you can now find British inspired permanent beer engines installed in beer bars across Omaha and Lincoln to serve these artfully finished ales in the style they deserve.

The Modern Monks have been brewing in Misty's Steakhouse in downtown Lincoln for about a year and a half now. Keeping rich Belgian-style ales close to their hearts, the Monks also flex their muscles with top-notch German-style and classic American lagers. The Monks are focusing a lot of attention on their barrel aging program, which is turning out some world-class oaked offerings that are becoming instant favorites in the area.

Let me assure you, I have hardly scratched the surface of what makes these local breweries great; they all come with my highest recommendations. These breweries are the ones that will be by the side of the Nebraskan better beer drinkers through thick and thin, and they are the ones that have put us on the map as a great beer state.



Lucky Bucket Company (La Vista, NE)
Certified Evil
9.6% ABV

Co-founder and head brewer, Zac Triemert has lots of practice aging beer in barrels. This is Certified Evil's third year of production, and the guys in La Vista have created a beer of no clear style. Black as night, the beer is aged in Cabernet red wine barrels with huge aromas of burnt toffee and cardamom leaping forward. Deep roasted espresso, red wine tannins and dry pineapple show first with notes of cherry, blueberry and grapefruit cutting through the chewy body. What starts out with a light sweetness finishes dry with a focus on citric aftertaste... pure evil.

Upstream Brewing Company (Omaha, NE)
Nebraska Coffee Imperial Rye Coffee Milk Stout
8.0% ABV



Even before it hits your tongue, it's hard not to fall in love with this beer. Solid aromas of robust coffee and bakers chocolate dominate the nose. Deep notes of dark roasted espresso and spicy toasted malt are huge players in this thick and viscous delight. The rich sweetness is reminiscent of Belgian chocolate; it wonderfully balances the roast character. This

beer is an epic adventure into the world of stouts with flavors so rich, you can almost chew them. This bad boy has only been released once, so here is to begging head brewer Mike Hall to get this one brewing again soon!



Nebraska Brewing Company/Reserve Series
Melange a Trois
(Papillion, NE)
10.2% ABV

When I tried the first batch years ago, then simply called "Chardonnay Blonde", I was absolutely floored. A strong golden Belgian-style beer at heart, this symphony of wine meets beer is laid down in Chardonnay barrels for extended

aging. The result is a beautiful harmony of a biscuity malt character, hints of peppery yeast phenolic and delicate light orchard fruit balanced perfectly with oaky, wood tannins and an unmistakable Chardonnay wine flavor. Words do not do this beer justice... there is no wonder these guys just came home from the 2011 Great American Beer Festival with the gold medal in Wood & Barrel-Aged Strong Beer Category.



Empyrean Brewing Company
Collapsar Oatmeal Stout (Lincoln, NE)
5.7% ABV

Head brewer, Rich Chapin has been crafting classic English style ales for a little over two decades now. This beer has everything you could want from an Oatmeal Stout with a nice but restrained coffee nose and a hint of toasty malts. If velvet were a liquid, this might be it – especially since the nitro version found on draft is so silky smooth. Pleasant notes of roasted malts will reassure drinkers intimidated by pitch-black ales. A nice underlying layer of chocolate and toasted bread make it hard to have just one.



Modern Monks (Lincoln, NE)
Templeton Rye Barrel Aged Imperial Stout
9.8% ABV

This is a "wow" beer – and one that can get you into quite a bit of trouble if you are not careful. It's an Imperial Stout aged in barrels from the Templeton distillery in Iowa, made famous for their prohibition era whiskey loved by gangster, Al Capone. Beautiful deep brown in color, this beer shows a nose with nice notes of whiskey surrounded by rich chocolate and hint of oak. The first sip is an explosion of deep chocolate fudge brownie, French pressed coffee and well-balanced notes of sweet whiskey, oak and vanilla. Dark chocolate carries long into finish. Sinfully decadent and delicious.



Bar Chat

by Dan Crowell

An Interview with Binoy Fernandez of IO Speak



The following is an interview recently conducted with Binoy Fernandez, whose new bar concept, *IO Speak*, is now open in the lower level of the Indian Oven (1010 Howard Street in downtown Omaha).

FSM: Describe IO Speak and its relationship to the Indian Oven

BF: The name IO Speak is short for 'Indian Oven Speakeasy'. I started here full-time a little over a year ago, and my coming on here represented almost a changing of the guard for the Indian Oven. The restaurant has been here since 1984, and my mom and my uncle were running it. I started here as a busboy and worked my way up to the floor, then into the kitchen. I started as a dishwasher and worked my way up to the line, so when I took over here, it was sort of moving from one generation to the next. Now it's starting to fit my vision, what I want it to be.

"People have asked me, 'How did you find this place?' Well, it really found us... I guess we found each other to give each other new life."

We've always prided ourselves on the quality of the cuisine that we provide, but I want to show that there's more that we have to offer: I chose cocktails to do that. Last November, I really got involved in trying to develop a drink program here. Not just the standard vodka or gin martini orders that come in, but actually looking for cocktails and saying, "this drink has been around for nearly 200 years". Take a drink like a Sazerac for example: we, in today's culture, have forgotten what a Sazerac tastes like – unless

you're in New Orleans. One of the things I want to do is to bring the concept of a good cocktail back to Omaha.

Prohibition in the U.S. sort of marked the end of what a good cocktail was. Then there were generations that went through and didn't really know what was going on. Now, with my generation, we're starting to rediscover and take what these greats did back then to a new horizon. The IO Speak represents an ode to the classics. It's another facet of what the Indian Oven can provide, but it's also to educate and to promote awareness that there are good drinks out there. They're not flavored vodka drinks; they get their flavors from this myriad of ingredients that go in, and then there's this great drink that comes out.

"It was interesting. Great education. But I wasn't a corporate person."

FSM: Are you developing cocktails that reflect Indian influences?

BF: We have done that in the restaurant. When people order a bloody mary, I use one of our Indian sauces to provide the heat and complexity to it. For the traditional margarita, we make our own tamarind syrup, which we add to the margarita to make it a tamarind margarita. It brings elements of the culture into a drink that is well-known and popular, but we're using some of our heritage in these classic drinks to make a new drink. We'll be incorporating these into suggested cocktail and food pairings in the future. But when we're making cocktails at IO Speak, we're



referencing and recreating the recognized 'classic' versions of the pre-prohibition cocktails we're focusing on.

FSM: What's your philosophy behind IO Speak?

BF: I'm not a college kid anymore. When I go out with my friends, we're not looking to get hammered. We have families and kids. When we go out, we're going out for the company, to enjoy time together. Part of that time together often times involves having a drink. Most bars I've been to seem to be geared toward the sports crowd or they're looking for large volume sales. There are good drinks out there, there are good bars out there, but they're hard to find.

"They're leaving us love notes and saying this and that. Does it get any better than that?"

FSM: How do you implement your vision for IO Speak?

BF: I do all the bartending, which is a challenge because IO Speak, the bar upstairs and hosting on the floor are all my duties. It's quite a bit to juggle, but my management staff has been very good with helping me do it, because they believe in what I'm doing. They think it's cool and they want to see it succeed. I've shown the staff upstairs how to handle the basics in terms of beer and wine service and basic cocktail preparation, but I've given instructions that if it requires stirring or shaking, come and find me. I'm currently wrestling with how to better educate my staff. There are always new things coming out, new things being discovered and old things being rediscovered.

FSM: What are your sources of inspiration?

BF: As far as the cocktails go, the online community: the blogs that are out there. Then there are some key individuals I've been fortunate enough to become friends with, like Tyler Fry (formerly at the Side Door, now at the Violet Hour in Chicago), as well as Ian McCarthy and Paul Kulik (The Boiler Room), that are enthusiastic about talking about this stuff and promoting it, or, "I've just tried this drink. You've got to try it". They've been very encouraging and very willing to experiment and try new things out.

FSM: What are some of the challenges associated with your approach?

BF: Myriad, to say the least. I do my own bar ingredients in-house. I make my own syrups, the juices are fresh and it makes a huge difference in the drinks (Fernandez also carves the ice for his cocktails from large blocks he forms onsite). I don't like to do any 'hard' marketing. You're never going to see an ad for IO Speak out there. It's a word of mouth thing. It's not a big space, and it's not the cheapest place around.

I've had people come down and they've gotten really mad at me because they wanted a particular vodka drink, and I've said, "you know, Myth is right down the street, it's a great vodka bar. I recommend you go there". It's a place you've got to know about to come down to. So that's just one of the challenges: how do you get people to know about it? I've teamed up with the DJs that I use at the IO Speak in order to spread the word, to tell people, "if you want a good cocktail, something classic, maybe something that's been forgotten and is now coming back, I'll make it for you".



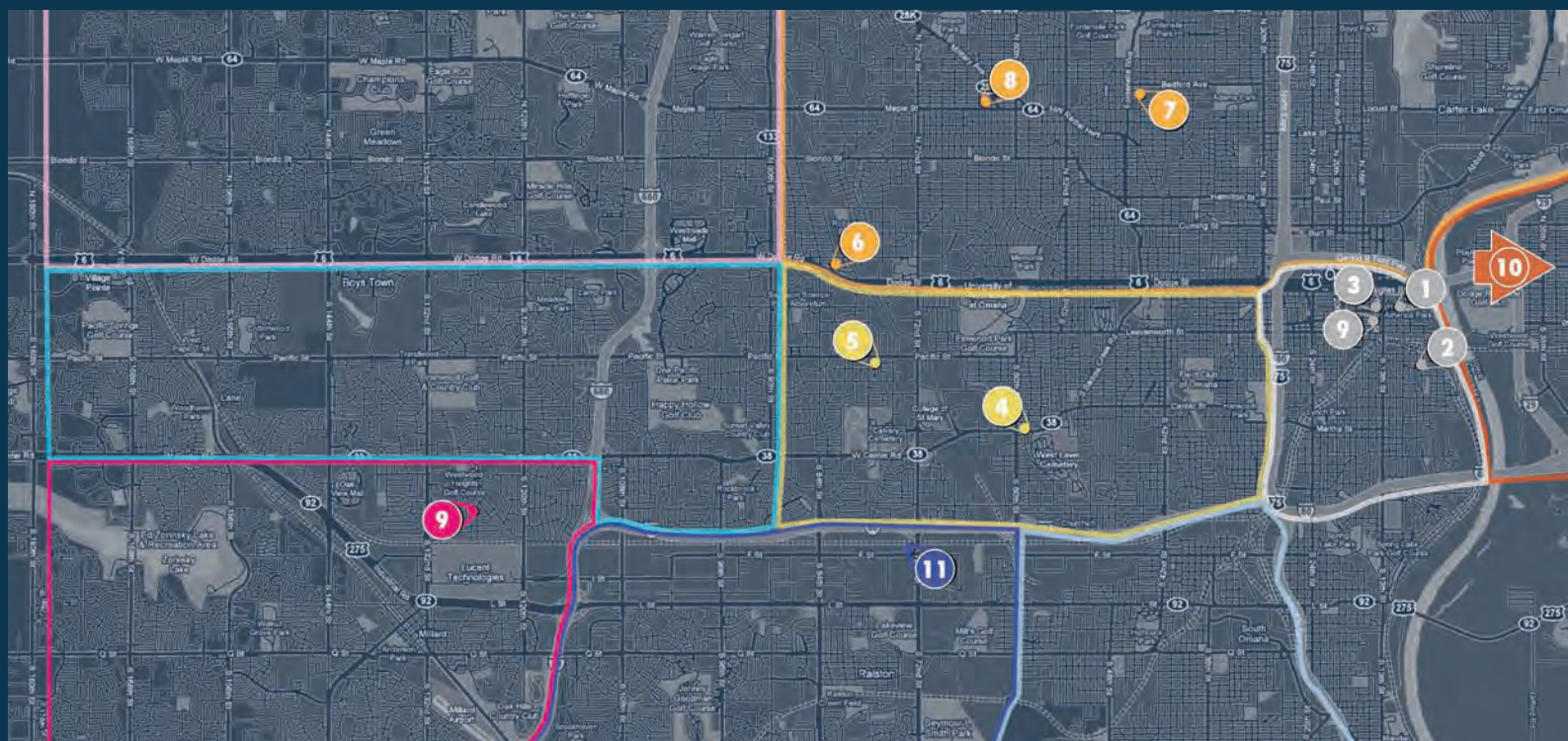
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FOOD & Spirits
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The Dumpster:

Condimentary

by Michael Campbell

I was 27 years old when I learned that ketchup doesn't come with a refrigerator. Every fridge I had ever met had ketchup, mustard and pickles. I never met anyone who bought ketchup.

My formative years had been spent living with a series of women, starting with my mother. They ranged from "caretaker" to "obsessive she-beast." I was encouraged to do "boy things", like mowing grass and sticking my arm into the toilet up to my shoulder to retrieve a dropped brooch or contact lens. I did not have security clearance for refrigerator inventory.

"A new refrigerator with a fresh bottle of mustard and ketchup is a glorious site."

Newly divorced, I was the first tenant in a freshly-renovated apartment, complete with new appliances. I opened the refrigerator to a scene from 2001: A Space Odyssey. I blinked as bright light poured out from the gleaming white plastic and chrome, without a hint of humanity. I pulled out a note pad and wrote across the top: "Grocery List." Beneath I wrote: "Everything."

At the grocery store I learned that cinnamon, rosemary and cayenne are about the same price as silver. I needed basics: glassware, flour, sugar, measuring cups, a can opener, mixing bowls, and ketchup. I looked, but there was no financing department. I was surprised to discover that "ketchup" was not a brand name. I found a variety of bottle sizes and shapes, but I figured it didn't matter because the contents were the identical tempera paint red. I chose Heinz because "Heinz ketchup" sounded familiar.

I selected a tub of Plochman's mustard because it came

in a familiar yellow plastic barrel with a red nipple on top, like that from which I nursed mustard as a kid. I hadn't noticed the barrel of mustard had a name on it. Heinz made mustard too, but "Heinz mustard" didn't sound right. A new refrigerator with a fresh bottle of mustard and ketchup is a glorious site, clean as an operating room. My apartment was now a home.

Mustard comes in many varieties: spicy, brown, sweet, maybe flecked with brown bits of what I think are seeds but look like flies. There is "Dijon," which is French for "someone who pays twice as much for mustard." These are gourmet foods, not condiments. You can tell the difference because the fancy mustards go on the top shelf of the refrigerator with your olives, feta cheese and capers. The yellow barrel of mustard goes in the door next to the ketchup.

Ketchup takes up a whole section at the grocery store. Family size, picnic-size, upside-down bottle with no-drip spout – but the stuff inside is all just ketchup. Some try labeling it "catsup", (which makes my pinky itch) to stick out. "Catsup" sounds like dinner's ready at a Vietnamese restaurant. I don't see any hot and spicy ketchup, smoked chunky mango ketchup, or ketchup with black flecks. The Heinz guys are smacking their foreheads for not thinking of it, because while they were making fancy upside-down bottles with clever slogans, the Mexicans invented hot and spicy chunky ketchup; they named it *salsa*.

"Ketchup takes up a whole section at the grocery store, but the stuff inside is all just ketchup."

How did ketchup earn a place in every American kitchen? We don't put ketchup on chicken, pizza or tacos. The bottle in my refrigerator today is the same one I bought in 1987, having outlived three refrigerators. Thanks to the magic of the American food industry, it's still edible. I've been through 200 bottles of Ranch dressing, which flavors everything from chips to cheeseburgers — just about everything but salads — but Ranch is still considered a second-tier condiment. I've seen Ranch-flavored Doritos, surely this is proof of its ubiquity. There are no ketchup-flavored chips, no hint of Ketchup Triscuits.

Ketchup is part of our religious ritual. Your burger arrives. You open it, discard the lettuce like a wet napkin and squeeze a spiral of ketchup followed by a zig-zag of mustard. Any restaurant table is stocked with four items — you know what they are. Since we all agree it is supposed to be on the food, why doesn't the chef apply it for you with his masterful hand, fancy as a \$5 cappuccino?

I've shopped for refrigerators. When I go to Bulbous Appliance Mart, the dazzling array of crisper trays, door options and water dispensers is overwhelming. *What do I really want?* A white refrigerator that comes with a stop-sign red bottle of ketchup and a PlaySkool yellow tub of mustard in the door tray.



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